

Practice Report

Practical Report on Graduation Research: Seminar Projects

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This practical report introduces seminar projects carried out in a private Japanese university's English department's as part of its graduation research requirement. Traditionally, Japanese universities students produce a graduation thesis upon completion of their seminar. However, due to changes in the academic levels of student entering the university, it was decided to allow different types of writing to be part of the department's graduation research. Project based Learning (PBL) seminar projects were introduced with a seminar project report being added to graduation research. The aim of this practical report is to introduce some of the seminar projects carried out and reported on as part of the graduation research requirement. It also explores some of the benefits the students receive by doing projects.

Introduction

This practical report introduces seminar projects carried out in a private Japanese university's English department's as part of its graduation research requirement. It briefly touches on the benefits of Project-Based Learning (PBL), why PBL was incorporated into the English department's graduation research requirement and several example projects and their results.

Benefits of PBL

Project Based Learning (PBL) is one method used to teach knowledge and skills that students need to learn. PBL requires critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and various forms of communication to answer a question and create high-quality work. Students need to do much more than remember information, they need to use higher-order thinking skills and learn to work as a team (Buck Institute for Education, n.d.).

PBL is different than traditional styles of teaching. PBL uses more student-centered, long-term, active learning to replace traditional methods of teaching such as lectures and textbook-workbook driven activities as the key elements in the curriculum (Crane, 2009).

The main idea behind project-based learning is that real-life problems capture students' interest and causes serious thinking as the students learn and apply new knowledge in a problem-solving context. The teacher's role is that of a facilitator. One who works with students to frame worthwhile questions, help decide meaningful tasks and assists with both knowledge development and social skills (Larmer and Mergendoller, 2010).

Comprehensive project-based learning includes the follow elements.

- It is organized around an open-ended driving question or challenge.
- It creates a need-to-know essential content and skills.
- It requires inquiry to learn and/or create something new.
- It requires critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and various forms of communication, often known as 21st century skills.
- It allows some degree of student voice and choice.
- It incorporates feedback and revision.
- It results in a publicly presented product or performance.

(Larmer and Mergendoller, 2010)

PBL has been demonstrated to be a useful method for developing critical-thinking, collaboration, problem-solving, life-long learning skills, creativity, and communication. These are what is commonly known as 21st century skills. It also has a considerable impact on improving English learners' language skills as well (Buck Institute for Education, n.d.; Poonpon, 2017).

Seminar Projects as part of Graduation Research

Recently, Our English department has had a wider range of students entering it. There has been an increase in the number of students with lower academic skills, less motivation and reduced study goals. This has led to a problem with students not acquiring the necessary skills to write an academic graduation thesis in their fourth year. To deal with this, it was thought that different types of writing should be allow as part of the department's graduation research. In 2016, the graduation research requirement was modified to include portfolios and research writing. This allows students to choose between a more traditional thesis writing and project-based writings. It was believed that modifying the graduation research would have three benefits. First, this would better match the students' skill level. Next, it would better incorporate 21st century skills. Finally, it would better motive students by allowing them more choices. As a result of this change, the International Relations and Business Seminar in the department replaced the graduations thesis with PBL seminar projects.

Project elements

Based on the stated elements of PBL, the International Relations and Business Seminar projects have several requirements that must be met when doing a project.

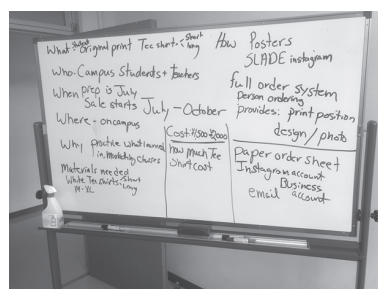
- Students choose the topic of the project with help from their instructor.
- The topic of the project must fit the theme of the seminar.
- The project must benefit the campus (or public in general).
- Student research how to carry out the project with guidance from their instructor.
- Students do the project work themselves with guidance from their instructor.
- The project must be able to be seen by others (published in some way).

- Students write a report at the completion of the project to be included in their graduation research document.

Preparation for the seminar project begins in the second semester of the 3rd year. Students and their instructor discuss the requirements for the project and students select a suitable theme. At the beginning of their 4th year, students begin working on their project. After discussing the project, but before beginning the actual work, students answer three questions about the project. 1. What do you think will you learn from this project? 2. What do you think will be the easiest part of the project? 3. What do you think will be the most difficult part of the project?

Students discuss and make a general business/project plan. They then break into smaller groups and research each part of the plan. Research is done by students both in and out of the classroom. At the beginning of each class, the results of their research are discussed and at the end of each class a weekly plan is made as to how to proceed. The research and weekly plans are recorded in their seminar book to help the students when they must write their seminar project report. The business/project plan is often revisited and revised with greater detail added as students become more aware of what needs to be done to complete the project. Often entire sections of the plan must be revised as students get new ideas from their research and they also realize some of the practical restriction of the project. Students' individual and group project responsibilities are decided and work schedules are made and then revised.

The project is carried out according to the latest business/project plan. After the project is completed, the results of the project are assessed, and a seminar project report is written by the students. In the conclusion of their seminar project report, students answer four questions. 1. What did you learn from this project? 2. What was the easiest part of the project? 3. What was the most difficult part of the project? 4. What was the most surprising part of this project.



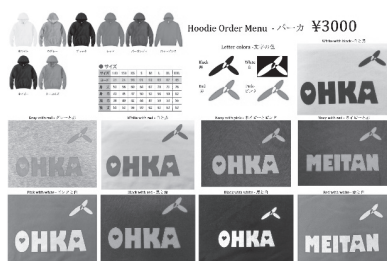
Project Examples

Hoodie Project (2016)

This project was designing and printing a university logo hoodie and selling it on campus to classmates, faculty and staff. The objectives of this project were to learn the basics of business and gain practical business experience.

Students chose the project to fit the business theme of the seminar class. As the benefit for the campus, the university did not sell university logo hoodies and there was a demand for this product. Students made a business plan. They decided the





basic who, what, when, where, why and how of the project. Later, they decided the smaller details of the project as they were needed. The students created several designs for the hoodie and surveyed campus students to find the most popular designs and colors. Additionally, they compared printing companies for cost, speed, and quality. With this information, they decided the price of the hoodie and the sales and ordering method. The students decided to take orders

for the hoodie and then have them printed. The seminar students had to determine what the best advertising method was and then create advertisements for the campus. Posters were put up around the campus with a QR code to LINE for more ordering information. The final business plan for the project was put into action in late October and students dealt with any problems that arose. Finally, the student created a post project report analyzing the results of the project and how it could have been improved.

In total, 45 people bought hoodies at ¥3,000 each. About 30% of the buyers were students and former students and the other 70% were teachers and staffs. The project needed to sell 90 hoodies to break even. As a result of the low sales, the project finished ¥26,278 in debt. Even though this project proved to be a financial failure, it was very educational for the students. After the sales were finished, students surveyed fellow students and teachers to find out why they didn't buy a hoodie. The results of this survey showed the seminar students that the hoodies were too expensive and many students didn't know about the hoodie sales despite the poster advertisements. These results were included in their seminar project report.



3-D Printer Project (2018)

This project was designing and printing products on a 3-D printer for sale to classmates, faculty and staff at the school festival. The objectives of this project were to learn the basics of business, gain practical business experience and gain experience with new technology. Students chose this project because they were interested in doing something new and different.

First students made a business plan for the project. They decided the basic steps of the project. Later, they decided the business plan's smaller details as it became necessary. The focus of the project turned out to be deciding the products and finding or creating models. Samples of the





products were printed, and campus students were surveyed to determine the most popular products, designs and colors. Cell phone holder, cookie cutters and a university logo magnet were chosen for the seminar project products. Next, students decided the price, sales method, and production schedule (3-D printing takes a lot of time to print an item). They decided the best advertising style and created advertisements for the products to put up on campus. In this case it was posters on

campus. The final business plan for the project was put into action in late October before the school festival. After the festival, the students created a post project report analyzing the results of the project and how it could have been improved.

The 3-D printed products were sold at the school festival. The iPhone holders sold well while the cookie cutters did not. The SLADE bunny magnets also sold better than expected. Overall, the project was a success even though there remained unsold products. The students learned new technology and had practical experience using it. They also learned about real-life business. The students realized that planning and research are very important for success in business. These results were reported in their seminar project report.



2020 Tokyo Olympics Website Project (2019)

This project was researching and creating a website discussing the problems and solutions of the planned 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The objectives of this project were to improve research skills, gain practical internet and webpage creation experience and provide useful, practical information to the general public.

This year's seminar students chose a topic that would fit the international relations theme of the seminar class. Students began by making a project plan. They decided the basic who, what, when, where, why and how of the project. Later, they decided the smaller details as their research progressed. They started researching the problems the 2020 Tokyo Olympics were experiencing or expecting to experience. At the same time, they researched the solutions Japan, Tokyo city or the 2020 Tokyo Olympic committee were implementing to fix these problems. They chose four main themes: hotel problems, transportation problems, security



problems, and heat problems to focus on as these seemed to be the main problems occurring with the Olympics.

Next, they compared web design companies and software for cost, quality of design and ease of use. After deciding the web design company, they decided the website design. They decided the style, basic colors and how the site would be navigated. The students put the website together, fixed any problems that arose and published it in November of 2019 at <https://clarke65.wixsite.com/website>. Finally, they created a post project report analyzing the results of the project and how it could have been improved.

The students wanted to make a website that contained information that visitors could use if they came to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. All information used had to have two or more credible sources. Also, as part of their research, the students went to Tokyo. They took the trains to visit many Olympic sites and other places around Tokyo. They talked to train stations employees, hotel employees, and restaurant employees about how they were preparing for the 2020 Olympics. The students were surprised by how helpful the people they talked to were and by how much information they could gather by visiting Tokyo. The project became much more real to the students after being in Tokyo. The website was bilingual (English and Japanese). The students tried to create a homepage that could be easily understood by as many people as possible, not just native English and Japanese speakers. They were careful to use language that was simple and clear and tried to make the website as easy to navigate as possible.

Students gained valuable research experience by doing this project. They also gained experience using the internet in a way that they would not normally use it. They had to carefully think about style, color, and design to attract people to their website. This project was different from the previous business projects and therefore had to be evaluated differently. It was successful in achieving its educational goals for the students, but it is unknown how many members of the general public have actually visited the website.

Student's Original T-shirt Project (2020)

This project was using a cloth printer to sell self-designed T-shirts to students, faculty and staff on campus. Students created their own design for a T-shirt and sent it to be printed



Conclusion

Among the various solutions for each issue through this Project, I felt the most realistic and unique was the hotel shortage issue. The main reason was that I thought about 'hospitality' using a ship, and I felt that there was an increasing number of devices to entertain visitors to solve problems such as hotels that are not made by people but by AI.

Also, not only looking, but actually listening the real voice, we were able to learn about the problems that Japan has and to create a place to share these problems with many people. Not only Japanese but also English was introduced to be transmitted to foreigners visiting Japan for engineering. We hope that our information will be transmitted to various people and it will be better for the Olympic Games to be more enjoyable.

このProjectを通して最も現実的でユニークな解決方法がある中で最も現実的かつユニークと感じたのはホテル不足問題でした。主な理由は、私は「ホスピタリティ」を船で表現しよう、と人ではなくAIによって成り代わるホテル不足問題を解決するために宿泊客を乗し、乗客が乗っている船にしました。また日本だけでなく実際に問題や意見を聞いてもらうことで日本が抱える問題についてですが、またこれらの問題を多くの人に共有する機会を作ることが出来ました。日本だけでなく観光で日本を訪れる外国人の方にも伝わるよう英語も取り入れました。私たちの情報が様々な人に出回り、より楽しいオリンピックになればいいなと思います。

- Accommodation problems -

blogs.com/blogger/postseven/article/. (n.d.). 東京五輪のホテル不足問題 豪華な「船泊」は救世主になるか Retrieved April 4, 2019, from <https://blogs.com/article/318919/>.

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by our seminar. The project used posters and Instagram as advertising. The objectives of this project were to learn the basics of business and gain practical business experience.

Students chose the project to fit the business theme of the seminar class. They wanted to put into practice what they had learned in their marketing class. Students made a business plan. They decided the basics of the project. They compared T-shirt supply companies for quality, cost, and speed of delivery. The students had to learn how to create designs themselves and print the T-shirts in order to understand the project. With this



information, they decided the price of the T-shirt and

the sale and ordering methods. The seminar students had to determine what the best advertising style was and then create advertisements for campus. The students decided to take orders and advertise the T-shirts on Instagram. Posters were also put up on campus with a QR code to Instagram for more ordering information. Third year seminar students tested their ordering method during

their class and gave suggestions for improvement. After several delays, the final business plan for the project was put into action and students dealt with any problems that arose. Finally, the student created a post project report analyzing the results of the project and how it could have been improved.

The original business plan was very different from the final business plan for this project. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and classes shifting from online to face-to-face and then back online again, the business plan had to be changed several times. The original plan called for sales over the summer and for sales to seminar groups wanting to have matching design T-shirts for the school festival. Uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic delayed the plan and eventually the school festival was moved online. The final business plan was for students wanting a T-shirt to send in their own designs and for the seminar to print them.

This project met its goals in that it allowed students to gain experience in business and use the marketing knowledge they learned in class. The students were also able to be creative. They made several original designs and printed sample T-shirts to practice using the machine. In this way they also gained experience with new technology.



Pre- and Post-Project Comparison

Each project collected pre- and post-project information. Comparison of this informa-

tion showed the actual projects results were very different from what the students expected them to be. In all of the projects, running out of time was a greater problem than students originally thought. Cooperation and scheduling were also said to be bigger problems in the post-project information collected than in the pre-project information. Many students could not be relied upon to get their part of the project completed by the scheduled deadline. This caused delays, wasted time, and fed into the problem of running out of time for the project. The actual work of the project was not as difficult as expected as stated in many of the post-project reports.

The Hoodie Project pre-project responses showed that students expected that doing the project itself would be the most difficult part of the project, for example, designing the hoodie, getting it printed and selling it. The students were also confident that the project would be a success. Post-project responses showed that student found cooperating, coordinating and dividing the workload equally and creating and keeping work schedules were the most difficult parts of the project. They found the project to have been more time consuming than initially expected. However, they also found it to be more interesting and useful than expected. The students were also surprised that the project was a financial failure. To further their critical-thinking skills, students were required to evaluate the hoodie project and try to determine the factors that caused it to be a financial failure. After analyzing the project and its results, the students made a list of those factors. Next, the students surveyed their classmates and other students on campus to find out why they didn't buy a hoodie. The results of this survey were then reported in the hoodie project report.

Conclusion

Overall, the teacher and students were happy with the projects and their results. The results of the projects have often been financial failures, but in failing the students have learned as much as they would have if the projects had been financially successful and maybe even more.

PBL through these seminar projects has given students experience in working within a group to successfully complete tasks. It has allowed them to experience many things that they normally would not experience by just writing a graduation thesis. It allowed them to think of new ideas, research and put those ideas into practice. They were in control of the project. They made the decisions that determined the success or failure of the project. Also, the students have really enjoyed working with classmates to do their project. The projects were something different for them. They did something they that had not thought they could do. For the students, this was very empowering.

Through these seminar projects, students have gain practical experience in several areas such as business planning, marketing and internet design and research. They have gained valuable experience using new technology with the 3-D printer and cloth printer. Maybe most importantly, the have learned the necessity of communication, and the value of planning and scheduling to be successful in their endeavors in life. It is hoped that the experience that students have gained while doing their projects have made them more

attractive job candidates and more confident people in life.

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